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FM AMEMBASSY SAN SALVADOR  
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC PRIORITY 0181  
INFO RUEHZA/WHA CENTRAL AMERICAN COLLECTIVE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SAN SALVADOR 001180

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/09/2018

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SUBJECT: EL SALVADOR: RIVAS ZAMORA WILL BE PDC PRESIDENTIAL  
CANDIDATE

REF: SAN SALVADOR 1158

Classified By: The Ambassador, for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) Summary: Carlos Rivas Zamora, former (left-wing) FMLN Mayor of San Salvador, was named as the (center-right, pro-U.S.) Christian Democrat Party (PDC) candidate for president October 8. His platform will center on a decentralization of the Salvadoran state. His candidacy aims to force a second round in order to prevent a Funes/FMLN victory. He believes Funes, if he wins the election, will face a significant challenge to his authority by the FMLN leadership. End Summary.

¶2. (C) Carlos Rivas Zamora, former (then-FMLN) Mayor of San Salvador was named as the Christian Democrat party's (PDC) candidate for President on September 24. He told PolCouns October 8 the PDC has two goals in 2009 Salvadoran elections: to force a second round and prevent an FMLN victory in presidential elections and to increase PDC's representation in the Legislative Assembly from six (of 84) deputies to as many as 12. (Note: Legislative and Municipal elections will be held February 18. Presidential elections will be held March 15, with a possible runoff April 19. End note.) PDC believes strong mayoral candidates in San Miguel and La Union as well as the effect of residual votes in legislative elections (see refTel para 6) make this possible. Rivas Zamora said PDC's platform will propose a decentralized Salvadoran state (along the lines of Spain) and an austerity plan. He said both the FMLN and ARENA depend on the highly centralized Salvadoran state in order to maintain their political duopoly and decentralization would be a key negotiating point if he succeeds in forcing a second round presidential vote. He plans to name a woman as his running mate.

¶3. (C) Reacting to San Salvador's Central American University Public Opinion Institute (UCA/IUDOP) poll released October 8 that gave (center-right, pro-U.S.) ARENA candidate Rodrigo Avila 34.2 percent support, FMLN's Mauricio Funes 49.7 percent, "none of the above" 13.3 percent (Note: the IUDOP poll only included Avila and Funes. End note.), Rivas Zamora said Avila faced a "difficult" election. However, he believes Funes faces a much more difficult, even dangerous, situation should he win. Rivas Zamora recounted his own experience after winning election as mayor of San Salvador. During the campaign, the FMLN allowed him to manage his campaign, select advisors, and advance policy positions. Immediately thereafter, then FMLN leader Schafik Handal informed Rivas Zamora that his city manager had been selected. Rivas Zamora countered that voters had selected him as Mayor and he alone would be responsible for meeting their expectations. Handal, he said, was furious, setting the stage for his eventual expulsion from the FMLN. Rivas Zamora believes a similar conflict awaits Funes, suggesting the FMLN will seek to dictate Funes' selection of ministers. Rivas Zamora specifically mentioned Funes' likely choice for Defense Minister, non-FMLN member and retired Salvadoran Army Colonel David Munguia Payes, saying he believed the FMLN

would insist on naming a hard-line party member to that post, possibly even dual-hatting FMLN VP candidate Salvador Sanchez Ceren.

14. (C) Comment: Rivas Zamora has no illusions of winning the Salvadoran presidency, but believes he can -- indeed, must -- draw enough votes from Funes in March in order to ensure a presidential runoff election in April. His own experience leads him to conclude the stakes for Funes -- and El Salvador -- are high. We agree. While Rivas Zamora's experience bucking the FMLN leadership is not encouraging, Funes has a combative style that guarantees FMLN challenges will not go unanswered. Unless the Salvadoran electorate's mood changes and ARENA's campaign message becomes more effective, the battle for El Salvador's future may extend well past inauguration day June 1, 2009.

GLAZER